

Birobidzhan: An Historical and Personal Account

For my parents, who have always supported me.

"But those who would attempt to convert Jews into peasants are committing a truly astonishing error."

--Theodore Herzl, *The Jewish State*

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The Pale of Settlement

On September 22, 1772, Empress Catherine II of Russia signed an agreement with Frederick of Prussia and Kaunitz of Austria that became known as the *rozbiór Polski*, or First Partition of Poland. In doing so, the Russian empire gained not only land in Eastern Europe, but also a large Jewish population which it had sought for years to remain without.¹ Some 19 years later, Catherine II issued an *ukaz*, or edict, which created the Pale of Settlement (*Cherta osedlosti*, or "Line of Settlement" in Russian) in what is now modern-day Latvia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania. This ukaz dictated that there were certain areas in which Jews would be permitted to live, run businesses, and own land. It covered approximately one million square kilometers, and was home to an estimate of 4,899,300 Jews, or 11.6% of the total population of the Pale of Settlement.² Within the Pale, as historians Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinhart note, "the tsars attempted to undermine the Jews' traditional way of life... to direct them into useful "non-Jewish" occupations and to encourage their assimilation."³

The Pale of Settlement would be Russia's first attempt to answer what would become known as the "Jewish Question" in the 19th century.

business endeavors that relied on usury and non-physical professions to earn livings. As a result, 90% of Russia's Jews were confined to the borders of the Pale of Settlement. Of that 90%, their occupations displayed their decidedly non-agrarian tendencies. The

Encyclopedia Judaica

would lead to a general impression of Jews as a people of intangible and esoteric business that would be revisited many years later when Khrushchev said to *Le Figaro*, a French newspaper, that "[the Jews] do not like collective work, group discipline."¹⁰

It was the nature of Russian legislation at the time that steered the Jewish people towards such "parasitism." Since the inception of the Pale of Settlement in 1791, "Jews had always been forbidden to acquire serfs or peasant land, lest they 'gain mastery over Christians.'"¹¹ As a result, the Jews of the Pale adopted any number of positions in trade and business to eke out a living in a society predisposed to making their lives difficult. Heavy economic tariffs hit Jewish enterprises hard. Of these taxes, the *korobka* (Russian for "box") was especially damaging. It was imposed in 1839 and served as a levee on kosher meat everywhere but in Russian Poland. There, a similar tax had existed since 1809.¹²

During the time that most of the Jews of the Russian Empire were confined to the Pale of Settlement, a series of other laws were passed regarding military conscription among the Jewish populations. According to Benjamin Nathans, "Nicholas [the First] sought to break down Jewish separatism and autonomy through state-sponsored 'merging.'"¹³ To do so, he passed a law in 1827 mandating that the draft be extended to

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measures were passed in 1829 and again in 1832 to separate Jewish soldiers from the army at large, and whatever assimilatory effect the conscription might have had was lost. Nathans notes, "Although Jewish soldiers often served in the Empire's interior, in areas otherwise off limits to Jews, upon completion of military service they were required to return immediately to the Pale."¹⁴

peoples."¹⁷

Gersevanov was by no means alone in his outcries against the Jews. Perhaps most often cited is the example of the revered Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky. His depiction of Isai Bumstein in Notes from the House of the Dead where the author describes the money-lender as a " ... thin, feeble, puny man ... with a wrinkled white body like a chicken's ... " and " ... a most comical mixture of naïveté, stupidity, craft, impudence, good nature, timidity, boastfulness, and insolence,"¹⁸ play on the Russian stereotypes of Jews at the time.

Dostoevsky also lashes out against Judaism with a passage in *The Brothers Karamazov*. In chapter XI, the disturbed and unstable Liza carries on a conversation with Alyosha, the sensitive and sympathetic hero. The following passage is often cited as evidence of Dostoevsky's instinctive anti-Semitism,

"Alyosha, is it true that the Jews steal little children at Passover and kill them with knives?"

"I do not know"

"Well, I have a book in which I read about a trial somewhere, where a Jew first cut off all the fingers of both hands belong

peasants." Urbanized Jews were considered to be, "swindlers, usurers, who survive by greed, cunning and a piece of herring, so as to increase their capital..."²³

Prominent wealthy Jews like the Gintsburgs and Poliakovs could do little to sway public opinion. The Gintsburg family kept their roots in mind and served as *shtadlanim*, or "court Jews" for their impoverished bretheren. Samuil Poliakov, who had built his fortune on a series of early railroad systems (called derisively "Jew-roads"), was a large benefactor in the creation of the Society for the Promotion of Handicrafts and Agricultural Work Among the Jews of Russia (*Obshestvo remeslenogo zemledel'cheskogo truda* or ORT).²⁴ Additionally, Poliakov hired predominantly Jewish staff, providing work for the poorer Jewry in addition to the legal right to reside outside the Pale. It would be this hiring practice that would lead to accusations and suspicions that Poliakov was promoting a Jewish success over the Russian majority and trying to colonize Jews along the railroad lines.

The frustration with the apparent wealth and success of the Jews began to brew even more fervently as time went on. Pogroms in 1871, 1881-1882, and again in 1905 brought violence, vandalism, and arson. The destruction was widespread. Often, newspapers would run special sections of their news under the headline, "Jewish Pogroms," and list the numbers of atrocities on any given day. Perhaps equally destructive was the constant threat of violence where there hadn't been yet. *Syn otechestva*, a Russian newspaper cited by Yaakov Ro'i, reported, "The Jews of Moscow spent an extremely anxious night expecting a pogrom. Almost no one slept in his

²² Ibid. 118.

²³ Klier, 54.

²⁴ Klier, 291.

apartment; they all hid with Christian acquaintances."²⁵

Even in the face of these massacres, the Jewish people remained divided. With no central house of religion or leader, each community remained its own separate entity, with little in the way of intercommunity unification. "There was little beyond that minima

useful purpose [under Communism]... and social class would be the only organizing principle of society."³⁰

However, there were literally hundreds of nationalities all under the Soviet flag, from the European-influenced St. Petersburg residents (who would soon become Leningrad residents) to the Evenk peoples of eastern Siberia, a land so murderously cold and uninviting that the main town is named Butugychag, or "the Place where Reindeer Sicken."³¹ To unify this fragmented, fragile empire, Lenin created what became known as Soviet ethnofederalism, whereby such peoples would have their own individual national states within the Soviet Union. Such an idea arose from a branch of Austrian Marxism, which posited that "national-cultural autonomy should be developed so that the proletariat could achieve political unity while preserving the cultural autonomy of the ethnic groups within it."³² There would be a Ukrainian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR), a Byelorussian ASSR, a Chechen, a Tatar, and so on. Through such ethnic tolerance and

transforming them into farmers."³³

It is noteworthy that for the ethnofederal movement, the prevailing paradigm -- except in the case of the Jews -- called for the preservation of national language and culture. A 1923 resolution regarding the creation of these autonomous regions "...established *korenizatsiia* (indigenization) as the most urgent item on the Soviet nationalities policy agenda."³⁴ Indeed, these assertions emphasized the preservation of indigenous populations so as to make Soviet culture understandable and more popular among other peoples. The goal was to make the Soviet philosophy a philosophy for the entire world, and in doing so, symbolic ethnicity was allowed under the new resolution. The Jews, however, presented a unique problem, for Judaism is not just a culture, but a religion as well, and Socialism called for an abandonment of religious practices.

³² *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, "Communism."

³³ Robert Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998) 16.

³⁴ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2001) 12.

Zionism/Bundism

While this notion of autonomous Soviet republics was a new concept, the idea behind a separation between Jewish and gentile populations was not. The Bund was founded in 1897 in Vilnius, Lithuania when a group of Marxist Jews gathered secretly to form the "Algemeyner Idisher Arbeter Bund in Liteh, Poyln un Rusland," (the Jewish Workers' Alliance in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia).³⁵ Members of the Bund believed that a Yiddish-speaking Jewish cultural homeland should be created, but that it should

socialism. By removing the urban centers and opportunities for trade and loan professions, the Jews could finally be integrated. William Siegel writes, "the establishment of the JAR [Jewish Autonomous Region] was designed to normalize the

"In 1926, 53% of the area was covered with thick virgin forests, 16% with swamps, and 14% with meadowland."⁴⁵ By selecting Birobidzhan, Stalin and his government had been able to establish a location that would Sovietize Jews, protect the USSR's borders, and reap the natural wealth of the region all at once.

The land, for all its natural resources, was by no means ideal. A research expedition of 180 scientists and government officials set out in 1927 to chart Kazakhstan and the Azov Sea region. As part of their duties, they spent a month and a half in Birobidzhan and in doing so, reported back to their superiors concerns of "...swamps, a

administrative privileges and greater autonomy would be granted. Incentives were created by the *Komzet* to attract poor Jews to this new way of life. Travel and food vouchers, tax exemptions, and voting privileges were offered to non-agricultural Jews willing to move to Birobidzhan and work the soil.

The migration began to the "island in a sea of mud" with 654 Jews, mostly Ukrainian, who packed their belongings and traveled out to Birobidzhan by the end of spring 1928, despite the fact that the exploratory party had decreed that prosperous, sustainable development could not begin until necessary improvements had been made on the land. They had suggested 1929 as the earliest possible date, and were roundly ignored.⁵² Additionally, the *Komzet* member Iurii Larin estimated that in order to support 9,000 families in Birobidzhan in the first five years, a government allocation of 20 million rubles would be required. A meager 3.3 million, or just 16.5% of that estimate, was actually allocated.⁵³

Other firsthand accounts of early conditions in Birobidzhan are similarly grim. Soviet journalist Viktor Fink traveled to the region in 1929 as part of a fund-raising operation and concluded that living conditions would "...put prisons to shame." He continued, "...the colonization of Birobidzhan was begun and executed without preparation, planning, and study."⁵⁴

again mostly from the Ukraine, made the trip eastward.⁵⁵

Soviet propaganda appealed to few or no Jews at all. *Ozet*, in an article from *Tribuna*, their official newspaper, attempted to attract Jewish settlers with the following propaganda:

The masses of Jewish toilers, who are permeated with loyalty and devotion to the Soviet regime, are going to Birobidzhan... they are not only fighting for their country, not for a new fatherland, as the USSR is already for them, but for strengthening the Soviet Union in the Far East.⁵⁶

Such nationalistic, physical labor-intensive fervor struck few chords among Jews, whose years of commerce and business practice had left them largely without agricultural knowledge. Indeed, in the first 654 Jews, not a single one had ever farmed before or knew anything about land clearing or drainage. The floods of 1928 and 1932 wreaked almost complete havoc on the region, leaving many fields inundated with brackish water. Year after year, Jews who had worked as blacksmiths, tinsmiths, tailors, and the like migrated to Birobidzhan to try their hands at the new project and to take advantage of the food and travel vouchers, and consistently, they gave up in almost equal numbers.

The original 654 settlers of March 1928 quickly dropped to 339 -- nearly half -- by October of that year. Statistics vary on the settlers of 1932, but *Ozet* approximated 80% and the first party secretary of Birobidzhan guessed that 66% of all Jewish immigrants to the region left within a year or two.⁵⁷ Of those that stayed, many remained in the urban center of Birobidzhan and took up the same jobs they had occupied in the west. By 1939, only 25% (4,404 of 17,695) of Jews lived in the countryside.

decree mandated that all government printings, from street signs to advertisements, had to be in both Yiddish and Russian.⁶⁰ Police proceedings would also be conducted in Yiddish, provided the parties involved were Jewish. Such allowances and cultural sensitivities were virtually unheard of toward Jews in the Crimea, and they fostered a surge of Jewish culture in the region. *Birobidzhaner Shtern* [Birobidzhan Star] began printing as a Jewish daily newspaper in 1930, and the Jewish Theater was founded four years later. Its first performance was a Sholem Aleichem story.⁶¹

Israel Emiot, a Yiddish writer and former resident of 1930s Birobidzhan, recalls that the cultural embrace extended far beyond the range of government organizations. He remarks that in 1937 and 1938, "Jew-haters (especially in the Ukraine)... now found their tongues again. In Birobidzhan this did not happen."⁶²

News of this unique, Jewish entity in the Soviet Far East spread around the world. In the United States, ICOR (*Idishe kolonizatsie organizatsie* or Association for Jewish Colonization) was founded to support agricultural Jews in the Soviet Union. With

sympathizers and donors from Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay.⁶³ The novelist Lion Feuchtwanger, having never been closer than six time zones from Birobidzhan, even went so far as to proclaim in 1937, "The Jewish socialist republic of Birobidzhan is a reality."⁶⁴

⁶² Emiot, 7.

⁶³ Weinberg, 55.

⁶⁴ Lion Feikhtvanger, *Moskva 1937: Otchet o poezdke dlia moikh družei* as cited in Weinberg, 53.

The Great Purges

All was not well, however, for the Jews of Birobidzhan, or for the Jews of Russia and Europe in general in the 1930's. As Adolf Hitler began his rise to power in Germany in 1933, Joseph Stalin began to initiate purges of opposition leaders and forces within the Soviet Union. The panic began with the death of Sergei Kirov, a youthful and well-liked Party leader who was killed on December, 1, 1934. While Kirov's death remains shrouded in mystery even to this day, his murder was officially blamed on Leonid Nikolaev, a minor Party member. In the ensuing investigation, however, sixteen prominent Soviets, including some well-known Jewish Communists like Grigorii Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, were arrested and shot for their part in what was framed as the creation of a "terroristic center" against Stalin.⁶⁵ It would mark the beginning of the Great Purges, which lasted from 1936 to 1938. During this time, widespread paranoia gripped the Soviet Union. Nikolai Ivanovich Ezhov, the new head of the NKVD (Soviet secret police), fed these fears as no other had done before. Those arrested were detained, questioned, and forced to confess to crimes of espionage and conspiracy with Trotskyites and bourgeois nationalists. Nora Levin states bluntly, "Estimates of the number of victims range from three to nine million."⁶⁶

The Jews of Birobidzhan, for all their isolation on the border with China, were by no means sheltered from the purges. Professor Yoysef Liberberg, a leader in the orchestration of a Yiddish language conference on the EAO, was suddenly and

⁶⁵ Levin, 316.

of events in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast became the fictive creations of the Soviet government. Reports from writer Yaacov Lvavi praised "transformed men" whose work was "excellently paid and the earnings of the medium family reach 12,000 roubles a year..."⁷¹ For all the trouble it had brought upon the government and people of the EAO, the Soviets were still preoccupied with settling the land along the Soviet-Chinese border. There was even a plan devised in 1940 to resettle 30-40,000 people from the newly-occupied lands of Poland, Romania, and the Baltics, but the Nazi offensive put a halt to that project.⁷²

Little is written about the Jewish Autonomous Region during the Second World War. Robert Weinberg, in his comprehensive analysis of the history of the region, mentions only briefly that "...the war years had witnessed the continuation of prewar trends in the region..."⁷³ He notes that the *Birobidzhaner Shtern*, the Yiddish daily newspaper, ceased printing in 1941 and didn't resume until 1944, and then moves directly into the Renaissance period of Birobidzhan from 1946 to 1948. Nora Levin, too, for all her 800 or so pages on Soviet Jews, simply states that "during the war, there had been rumors that Jewish orphans had been evacuated to Birobidzhan."⁷⁴ She continues with a small description of an American fund-raising drive for orphans, but says that only 95 war orphans were ever brought to Birobidzhan, and that for all intents and purposes, "...Jewish life had essentially come to a standstill in Birobidzhan."⁷⁵

What is most surprising is that there seem to be no accounts of this time period.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 68.

⁷¹ Yaacov Lvavi, *Ha-Hityashvut Ha-Yehudit Be-Birobijan* as cited in Levin, 310.

⁷² Levin, 311.

⁷³ Weinberg, 71.

⁷⁴ Levin, 489.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 489.

During the most trying and horrific years in all of Jewish history, this tiny exclave seems to have shut its printing presses down and waited to see what would happen. There are no letters to relatives, no accounts of fearful anxiety or of grief. The absence of information in texts usually so diligent and thorough is so consistent as to be somewhat mysterious. Lev Toitman, chairman of the Jewish community of Birobidzhan in 2006, had been sent away to fight in western Russia and Germany during the Second World War, but he commented that during this time in the history of the EAO, essentially nothing happened. Both he and Elena Sarashevskiaia, Yiddish writer and resident historian at the *Birobidzhaner Shtern* newspaper, agree that the *Shtern* closed during the

war veterans and survivors, as well as many *kolkhoz* [collective farm] farmers, poured into the Jewish Autonomous Oblast from 1946 until October of 1948. The last train of this renaissance arrived around 9 o'clock on the morning of October 9th, 1948 filled with émigrés from Samarkand, and "...officials clustered around a podium to greet them."⁷⁸

This would prove to be the final wave of people before the Black Years set in.

⁷⁷ *Birobidzhanskaia zvezda*

by a shout, "Don't go up there! It's not the old man any more!"⁸² The collaborator and lone witness to the murder, V. Golubov-Potapov, was also killed in the same way after he had completed his task. An anonymous phone call to the Yiddish Theater in Moscow proclaimed, "We have finished off your first Jew, and now comes the turn for all the rest of you."⁸³ At the same time, famous cultural figures like poet Anna Akhmatova and composer Dmitrii Shostakovich (a friend of Mikhoels) became targets of public criticism. The two campaigns, one against "formalist" artists and the other against Jews, spun into high gear simultaneously.

Il'ia Ehrenburg, a famous Jewish writer in the Soviet Union, was called upon by the editor of *Pravda*, the preeminent Soviet newspaper, to write an article reminding Jews of their loyalty to the government and not to their race. He called Zionists "...those anti-Semites who uprooted the Jews from their long-established homes..." and called the newly-formed State of Israel, "...a bourgeois state and a tool of Anglo-American imperialism."⁸⁴

As 1948 gave way to 1949, the anti-Semitism continued to build. The last remaining Yiddish schools in the cities of Vilnius and Kaunas were closed. In a move seemingly inspired by Germany's *Kristallnacht*, Jewish books and manuscripts were

gulags, remarked, "...the Jewish Autonomous Region did not fulfill our hopes; it became instead a factory for Jewish assimilation."⁹⁵ A current resident of Birobidzhan, unnamed in Yale Strom's film, comments,

"I always think that if my father were able to come out of his grave and see what had become of the world that he created with his own two hands, he would want to die again. His whole generation, his peers he grew up with, who raised this land out of the swamps, came to the conclusion that they wasted their lives."

⁹⁵ Gennadi Kostyrchenko, *Out of the Red Shadows: Anti-Semitism in Stalin's Russia. From the Secret Archives of the Former Soviet Union* as cited in Weinberg, 85.

that there is a synagogue in town, few know exactly where it is. When the synagogue is finally located, the visitor will soon learn that the building is used by Christian groups rather than Jews."⁹⁸ He goes on to impress upon his reader the destitute and terrible conditions that residents of the EAO faced, stating that "...conditions in the Jewish autonomy are significantly worse than in the neighboring territories of Khabarovsk Krai and Amurskaya Oblast." Siegel also mentions a farmer he met in Valdgeim Kolkhoz whose monthly salary of 200,000 rubles (about U.S. \$40) had not been paid in four months.

In the 25 October 1991 Declaration on the State-Legal Status of the Jewish Autonomous Republic, Russian was declared the titular language of the EAO. It also served to imbue the EAO with the exclusive rights to timber, mining, airspace, and other natural sources of income, and to declare the EAO a full republic. Those rights allowed the government of the EAO to assert greater control over the resources and administrative duties that had previously been attributed to the national government.

⁹⁸ Siegel, 429.

Birobidzhan Today

As of the fall of 2005, the most recent definitive academic survey of Jewish life in Birobidzhan was Robert Weinberg's indispensable but dated 1996 book entitled, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*. He concludes his work with an ominous observation that, "...the state of affairs in 1996 strongly suggests that the future of Jewish life in the region is bleak..."⁹⁹

Since his book, CNN, The Jerusalem Post, and several other news organizations and a smattering of interested tourists had visited Birobidzhan and reported their findings.

Their accounts varied greatly on every conceivable aspect of life, from tales of abject poverty to moderate economic success (relative to the rest of the Russian Far East), from

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"Less than it would cost to claim your son's body."¹⁰⁰

In short, the outside perception of this corner of the Russian Federation is that of a lawless, wild, impossible-to-govern region. Dr. Samuel Kliger, director of the Former Soviet Union department of the American Jewish Committee, also expressed a general widespread distaste for the Birobidzhan project. He wrote in an e-mail to me, "For us, Russian Jews, this Republic was just another Soviet (Stalin) trick staged to deflect attention from the real situation with 'Jewish question' in Soviet Union to a remote Eastern Siberian region with no historic Jewish roots whatsoever. We saw it as a mockery."¹⁰¹ In the months approaching my trip, I received e-mails and articles from concerned friends and contacts regarding human trafficking in the area, kidnapping, and mafia corruption. The prevailing wisdom seemed to be that this area on the edge of the Russian tundra was a colder version of Chechnya.

As the wheels of Asiana Airlines flight 572 touched down on the icy tarmac in

to find a reason to deport me. I'm a guest in their country. If I do something people don't like, or I upset the government, it gives them a reason to kick me out, which is all they're looking for."

and asked me what exactly the building I had just emerged from was for. I replied that it was a synagogue, and when that was met with a blank look, I realized the full extent of her lack of exposure. "*Eto evreiskii khram,*" [It's a Jewish church,] I conceded.

The rabbi's seclusion and fear is all too often warranted. The day of my meeting with Rabbi Iasha, news came from the West that a skinhead in Moscow had attacked congregants at the Chabad Bronnaia Synagogue there with a knife, stabbing eight people before being subdued.¹⁰⁴ The attacker, identified as a 20-year-old Muscovite neo-Nazi named Aleksandr Koptsev, allegedly screamed, "I came here to kill!" as he wielded his knife around the synagogue. Pravda, the pre-eminent Russian newspaper, cited Koptsev's relatives as saying, "*Aleksandr mnogo vremeni provodil za kompiuternymi igrami...*" [Aleksandr spent a lot of time playing computer games] and named a game called *Pochtal'on* as being primarily responsible.¹⁰⁵ The attacker was sentenced on March 28, 2006 to thirteen years in prison. The New York Times reported that Koptsev said that he attacked the members of the synagogue because "their living standards were better than his."¹⁰⁶ The same reasons for the pogroms of the late nineteenth century resurfaced in this attack.

Koptsev's father insists that his son, despite his shaved head and overt anti-Semitic stabbing spree, had no skinhead affiliation. Most disturbingly, according to the *Moscow Times*, "The stabbings are the latest in a growing series of incidents apparently involving skinheads or racist groups in Russia." The article went on to quote President

¹⁰⁴ Oksana Yablokova and Kevin O'Flynn, "Synagogue Rampage Leaves 8 Wounded - January 12, 2006," *Moscow Times*, <http://www.moscowtimes.ru/stories/2006/01/12/002.html> (accessed March 10, 2006)

¹⁰⁵ Pravda. "Aleksandr Koptsev zaranee gotovilsia k ponozhovshchine v sinagoge," <http://www.pravda.ru/news/accidents/12-01-2006/73591-0> Russian language. January 12, 2006, (accessed March 20, 2006).

¹⁰⁶ "World Briefing: Russia: Synagogue Attacker gets 13 years," *New York Times*, 28 March 2006. A7.

Vladimir Putin a year earlier when he said to world leaders at the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, "...we sometimes unfortunately see manifestations of this problem, and I too am ashamed of that." It also points out that only a few weeks before

argue. Instead, I accepted my yellowed ticket and followed her into the first room. The attendant abandoned her post at the front door to walk me around, and it was clear that I would most likely be the only visitor today. I trailed my "guide" from room to room, waiting for her to silently turn on each light before proceeding. The two floors were dutifully decorated and labeled with historical documents, Soviet-era farming and industrial equipment, and aged Judaica, but I had the distinct impression that I was keeping my lethargic companion from something far more pressing, so I walked quickly through the last few rooms. A sensation of "it's officially here to see if you really want to," was ever-present in the museum.

The antithesis to this was the home and family of Rabbi Mordechai Sheiner, a Lubavitch rabbi from Israel who moved with his wife and children to Birobidzhan four years ago. He is a short, bespectacled man of generous proportions and temperament, and it has been his influence that has brought about a renaissance in the Jewish community. During his tenure, a new synagogue, sukkah, three large *hanukkiot*, and a headquarters for the Jewish community organization "Freid" have all been built, and Rabbi Sheiner ("Mordechai," as he's known to his congregants) works daily on his newest project: a Jewish learning center. While he shapes styrofoam into a Kotel replica and prints labels for plastic lulav and etrog (traditional religious symbols for the holiday of *Sukkot*), his six children, all of whom are under the age of eleven, roam the hall 12.16 cm (t) 0.2 (0 0 518 5

boy by the name of Levi, expressed the number "fourteen" to me as "arbanadsat," a contraction of the Hebrew word "arba" ("four") and the Russian "teen" ending, "-nadsat." His Yiddish comes from occasional instruction from his father when the mood strikes them.

Mordechai Sheiner's enthusiasm for his faith and his endless projects dominated our conversations, as he spoke quickly and with kinetic hand gestures while describing grand plans for kosher restaurants, kosher butcher facilities, and a mikvah. The most modest estimates anticipate that a restaurant would cost around \$20,000, and a mikvah another \$140,000.¹¹⁰ The money is donated partially from private philanthropy and partially from the JDC (Joint Distribution Committee, whose Far East headquarters is in Krasnoyarsk), but the contributions are slow in coming, and usually not as grand and ambitious as the plans that the rabbi has made for them.

Despite his economic frustrations, Rabbi Sheiner is a man who seems content in the knowledge that his work will never be done. I asked the rabbi, who is in his mid-thirties, if he thought he would spend the rest of his life in Birobidzhan or eventually move back to Israel. He replied in his rapid, broken Russian, "*Ia zhivu v Birobidzhane seichas, no kogda Moshiakh pridet, ia budu zhit' v Israele eshche raz.*" [I live in Birobidzhan now, but when the Moshiach comes, I will live in Israel again.]¹¹¹ He continued with a smile, "*Ia nadeius chtoby on bistro.*" [I hope that he is fast.] A gigantic three-foot-by-three-foot blow-up picture -- larger than all but two of the children -- of the Lubavitch Rebbe Menachem Schneerson hangs imposingly in the dining room cum rec room cum library.

While Rabbi Sheiner spends his days at the synagogue, constructing and planning, his wife Esti tends to their three-bedroom apartment on the first floor of a crumbling, Soviet-era complex. With the help of her eldest daughter, Musi, who at eleven has already been consigned to laundry and infant-tending duties in addition to her schoolwork, Esti manages to keep pace with her children while baking loaf after loaf of challah for members of the community. In her spare time (if she can be said to have any), Esti has written nearly a dozen children's books in Russian on the family computer, which is tucked away in the back of a walk-in closet next to bottles of laundry detergent and boxes of Shabbat candles. The books have titles like *Iosef, pochitaiushchii subbotu* [Joseph, Admirer of the Sabbath] and *Prints, stavshii evreem* [The Prince Who Became a Jew] and address Jewish customs like the Sabbath, *kippot* (Jewish religious skullcaps), and various holiday stories. Esti's tired eyes revealed her years of service to her husband,

for which both the rabbi and his wife thanked me profusely. Rabbi Sheiner later confessed somewhat sadly to me that it was the first chocolate his children had eaten in nearly four months. The family observes strict kosher dietary laws, and since there are no kosher shops, restaurants, or facilities for thousands of miles, they must make their own food, churn their own butter, and once in awhile, travel to the countryside to observe the kosher milking of a cow if they are to have any dairy. Twice a year the family receives a shipment of kosher food from Israel, and they have ample money for fruits, vegetables, and eggs from the local markets, but simple foods like chicken and chocolate are rare delicacies. I was told that Doli, the sweet and perpetually smiling third child,

industry, and administration appeared to be missing. Valdgeim seemed to have collapsed upon itself after the *kolkhoz* at its economic center disappeared. According to Mariia Leonidovna, all but eighty or so Jews have moved out or abandoned Valdgeim in favor of Israel, and those who remain are mostly too poor or sick to make the trip. The caretaker is one of the last able-bodied Jews in the town, and she curates the hall largely on her own budget. Most of the old photos that adorn the walls of the one-room museum are of Mariia's family, and Roald laughed as he found himself in several of them. The Judaica section was comprised exclusively of cheap plastic trinkets donated by

living here to see Valdgeim turn ninety.

Like the entire town of Valdgeim, the old, multi-ethnic cemetery of Birobidzhan has fallen into ruin and disrepair. Rabbi Sheiner, despite being a wealth of information about most things Jewish in town, couldn't tell me how to get there, nor could most of his congregation. The *kladbishche* lies about two kilometers from the town center in a lonely patch of woods next to an industrial gasoline storage facility, and filled with the graves of Jews and non-Jews alike who pioneered the efforts to start a city in this foreboding environment. The cemetery is completely unmarked, and it was only for Roald's memory that we found it at all. His granddaughter, for all her 23 years living as a part of the Jewish community in Birobidzhan, had never seen it.

The grave markers, regardless of religious affiliation, were broken and overturned. Pictures glazed onto the stones had long since faded, rusted, and cracked. There was no organization or symmetry to the tombstones whatsoever; it was as if each time someone was buried there, a new grave had been dug at a different angle and at a different random distance from the others. Skinny birch trees and tufts of undergrowth made walking in the knee-high snow a challenge, and there were gaps between groups of unrelated plots for no apparent reason. Jewish headstones of indeterminate age rusted next to imposing metal Communist star-laden markers from the 1960's. The twisted points of individual plot gates lay at threatening angles. The brave, enterprising pioneers of this corner of the Siberian Far East -- Jewish and Christian alike -- who survived the murderously cold weather, the barren farmland, and the almos av[(of) -0.5 (t)0.2 24 0.2 (one350.9473 46

been the worst in the history of the region. According to his recollections, many Jews had abandoned the Soviet Union for America and France, and for those who stayed, "*Shis. Ty znaesh chto eto 'shis' ?*", using the Yiddish word for "to shoot" and pointing his fingers accordingly. Mr. Toitman remembered a group of as many as a thousand Jews being arrested and shipped to a gulag in Magadan, and that only one of them returned.

The future of Birobidzhan according to Lev Toitman looks bright. Though as little as fifteen years ago, nearly everyone packed up and left for Israel, the chairman remarked that many have since come back to the EAO, and that culture was thriving. He commented with a smile, "*V 1992-om godu, ne bylo biznesa, ne bylo liudei, ne bylo nichego. No segodnia, my ne kak Brighton Beach, ne kak Brooklyn, gde vse na idish, no zdes' u nas Tsimes.*" [In 1992, there was no business, no people, nothing. But now, we are not like Brighton Beach, we are not like Brooklyn, where everything is in Yiddish, but here we have Tsimes.]¹¹⁷ The "Tsimes" he referred to is a chain of supermarket/deli shops all throughout Birobidzhan which feature Yiddish-style lettering and menorahs on their signs.

For all the heritage "Tsimes" brings to its external decorations, the inside is completely secular. There, one can buy ham, salami, or any other pork product, as well

In my week in Birobidzhan (after getting off the train), I saw not a single piece of racial graffiti and heard not a single slur. Unfortunately, Roald Vasiliev's granddaughter Ol'ga and a fifteen-year old boy named Oleg Reis I spoke to in the synagogue told me a different story. Ol'ga noted that in the past few years, skinheads had become a minute but disturbing minority in the community, and Oleg said that at times he has been derisively called "*Zhid*," [Yid] in school. Neither one seemed upset or overly concerned about these developments. After all, Rabbi Sheiner walks down the street every day with his *kippah* in plain sight, receiving a "Shalom" from everyone he knows, Jew and non-Jew alike. While everyone I spoke to in Birobidzhan showed an extreme fondness for their community and a strong emphasis on interfaith cooperation and understanding, but it should be noted that anti-Semitism does in fact exist in Birobidzhan, if only on a small

In addition to Vasiliev and his accordion, Lev Toitman told me a story about a meeting between Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon and Russian premier Vladimir Putin. The two met in 2004 in Moscow, and as the chairman tells the story, Putin said something to the effect of, "You know, we also have a Jewish homeland. You should visit." Both Toitman and Rabbi Sheiner grinned broadly at the prospect of playing host to Ariel Sharon, and Chairman Toitman was insistent that the prime minister wanted to make the trip, but that he couldn't for some reason. I smiled as I thought of the leader of

"I togda, ya uveren, vozroditsia vnov' moia rodnaia evreiskaia avtonomnaia oblast'."

[And then,

the *sem'ia*, the *mishpokhe*, however one expresses it, that makes life -- particularly life as a Jewish minority -- possible in a locale so foreboding. It's eleven-year old Musi Sheiner hanging the laundry to dry not because the family can't afford a dryer, but because when they tried to buy one, no one in Birobidzhan even knew what it was. It's Doli Sheiner, a week shy of her eighth birthday, helping her younger sister with her mittens without even being told to. It's Esti writing children's books about Judaism for her family and for others in town. It's Rabbi Mordechai, whose devotion to his faith and his desire to serve his community led him quite literally to the ends of the Earth. Each member of this family works as a responsible, diligent piece of the whole to ensure prosperity and survival, just as each member of the community at large contributes something. Eighty-year old Pesach, one of the community elders, sweeps the snow from the synagogue pavilion every day. Roald Vasiliyev, with his toothless grin, plays the accordion once a week to his fellow aging pensioners. These aren't chores for the children or tasks to keep the old men busy. These are responsibilities to one another.

Nothing is taken for granted in Birobidzhan, and nothing goes unappreciated. I will never forget the look on the faces of the Sheiner children when I gave them that cheap box of kosher Hanukkah chocolate. To them, it could have just as easily been bars of gold. Those children are grateful for what they have, and not sorry for what they don't. The community bands together to overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that have been thrown in their way. Perhaps it is the rest of the world that has eaten from the

the tiny "island in the sea of mud," despite the motivations or intentions of the Soviet government which founded it, there really does exist a *tsiyon*.

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